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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly defines parent involvement in education, outlines several factors that are fueling new state interest in programs to strengthen families, describes programmatic initiatives in several states, and examines some of the issues states have faced in their efforts to craft effective community-based programs that are responsive to families. States mentioned include Alaska, Kentucky, Arkansas, Connecticut, Maryland, California, Missouri, and Minnesota. Of these, the last two have enacted recent legislation that provides for statewide family support and education programs. Individuals have used the states' experiences to identify issues that must be addressed in the crafting of policies on family support and education programs. The experience of pioneering states suggests that family support and education programs offer states a powerful way to build new support for families. One concern is that the impetus for government agendas regarding the welfare of young children and their families will shift before policy and action can produce programs that help families nurture children to realize their potential. A table indicates what is provided by community-based family support and education programs. (RH)

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Parent Involvement and Education:

State Initiated Family Support and Education

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The means by which problems and concerns come to receive governmental attention and, therefore, potential action by the public sector, has been called agenda-building or agenda-setting by political scientists (Nelson and Lindenfeld, 1978). Widespread recognition of the problems of young children and their families appears to be moving into the stage of cultural and institutional readiness necessary for governmental change to take place. Governors, legislators, executive agency staff, state advocacy organizations, and specially convened commissions are issuing reports, developing pilot programs, and crafting legislation that focuses on ways to strengthen families to prevent a variety of family related problems (Weiss, 1988). Individual states are beginning to assume more and more responsibility for promoting the development of strong families. Many choices and challenges face state policymakers as they translate what is often a general, diffuse interest in strengthening families into family support and education initiatives and programs. In the process, state policymakers are challenged to redefine the relationships among families, communities, the public schools, and the state.

New state interest and support also poses substantial challenges for existing programs, many of which have sprung up outside of traditional social service and education sectors. These grass roots programs have often filled an empty niche in their communities' continuum of child and family services. They now find themselves being considered for admission into the mainstream of human services. State-supported programs can be bureaucratic, standardized, categorical, and inflexible, qualities that family support and education programs have struggled to avoid. Existing programs must therefore negotiate a way to reap the benefits of broader public support and funding, while maintaining the special ways of relating to families that distinguish them from traditional, child-oriented programs -- the very qualities that contribute to their effectiveness.

It is thus a critical time for all concerned with the provision of family support and education to learn about, and become involved, in shaping their states' efforts in this regard. This paper will briefly define what we mean by parent involvement in education, outline several factors that are driving this new state interest in families, describe programmatic initiatives in five states, and examine some of the issues and choices these states have faced in their efforts to craft effective, community-based programs that are responsive to families.

Defining Parental Involvement in Education

Before discussing why family support and education has moved onto the policy agenda and current state initiatives in this area, it is necessary to characterize what we mean by parent involvement in the education of young children.

School-based family support and education programs and services are part of the larger family support movement, in which many social institutions and agencies -- community development agencies, health clinics, churches, neighborhood organizations and others -- have begun to offer preventive, family-oriented programming to promote human development (Weissbourd, 1987; Weiss, 1988).

Programs to strengthen parents' child-rearing capacities and promote child development, particularly in low-income families, have a long history in America (Weiss & Halpern, 1988; Grubb & Lazerson, 1982). They were a prominent part of early childhood programs launched during the War on Poverty. A number of early-childhood research and demonstration programs of that period started from the premise that maternal socialization practices and early teaching strategies in low-income families needed to be strengthened to better prepare children for school. Some programs, including Gordon's Florida Parent Education Program, Gray's Early Training Project, and Levenstein's Mother-Child Program, offered primarily home-based services to mothers and their children. Others, such as the Perry Preschool Project and the Parent-Child Development Centers, offered center-based programs for children and weekly parent support and education through home visits as well.

In the 1970s and 1980s, thousands of largely unevaluated but nonetheless popular community-based

programs proliferated around the country. A few states, including Minnesota and Missouri, initiated pilot programs that worked with families to create a home environment and parenting practices that would promote the child's eventual school success. Although public schools across the country have not always been in the vanguard of those initiating these programs, by the mid-1980s, more and more school districts, and some state departments of education, have either initiating these programs for families with children from birth to six, or have cooperated or contracted with other community agencies in order to do so.

School-based programs, like those under other auspices, have a number of features in common, including the general goal of promoting the familial conditions and parental competencies and behaviors that contribute to child, maternal, and familial development. The programs typically provide information about child development, parenting, and adult development; feedback and guidance on child rearing issues; joint problem-solving; information and referral to other community agencies; and reinforcement, encouragement, and emotional support to families with young children. School-based programs in particular have stressed the importance of strengthening the child's early learning environment, and of reinforcing the parents in their role as the child's first teachers. This information and support may be provided through home visits, peer support groups and parent education classes. Programs many times include additional services, such as a drop-in center, developmental child care or respite care, health and/or developmental screening, toy and book lending, newsletters, and counseling. These services are offered alone or in conjunction with other pre-school programs, for example, pre-kindergarten programs for at-risk children or services for young children with disabilities.

We have found that programs are not limited exclusively to child development and supporting parents in their parenting roles. Programs can become catalysts for parents' personal development as well. A few state programs, for example, Kentucky's Parent and Child Education (PACE) program, and some local districts offering Missouri's Parents As Teachers Program (PAT) are building on this catalytic effect by adding an adult literacy component and making their programs explicitly two-generational.

A number of key characteristics distinguish these programs from many other educational and social programs (refer to Table 1). One of the most important of these characteristics is the programs' attitude

toward parents and, following from that, the ways in which staff relate to parents. Rather than assuming family deficits, the programs emphasize family strengths and work to empower parents. Parents are regarded as partners: their strengths, knowledge and experience are acknowledged as cornerstones of the program-parent relationship. Through peer support and informal networking, programs create a situation in which parents can learn from one another, as well as from program staff. Hence, these programs are not uni-directional -- knowledge does not flow solely from the professional to the parent -- they are partnerships, or complex, multi-lateral relationships wherein parents, professionals and other parents exchange information and support.

To the extent that they are not uni-directional, nor excessively didactic in what they attempt to convey to parents, these programs differ from many narrower parent education and parent involvement activities. They should not be confused, for example, with more superficial efforts to provide parent education by presenting speakers for parents of young children once or twice a semester or the mailing of school newsletters to families. Such efforts should not be defined as family support and education because they do not provide sustained education and support, nor do they attempt to create a strong and enduring partnership with the parent to promote the child's development. These efforts are not without merit, but they are unlikely to affect the early home environment in ways that lead to enhanced child development, particularly in the case of at-risk children and families.

Recent Interest in Programs to Strengthen Families

Several factors are driving the recent interest of state policymakers in family support and education programming. **First, policymakers are beginning to adopt the logic of prevention.** Studies done by numerous state policy and planning organizations and state commissions on at-risk children and youth, point to the need for early intervention in order to prevent subsequent problems in adolescence and adulthood. Furthermore, analyses of the causes of certain family- and child-related social problems tie inadequate family functioning to inadequate social support. Policymakers have responded by committing some resources to preventive family-oriented programming. New child- and family- related legislative proposals suggest that

many policymakers do not believe that putting more money into traditional services is a sufficient strategy for alleviating contemporary social problems. Rather, they argue, there is a need both for new approaches and for the adaptation of traditional programs to make them more supportive of families. As a result, general policy discussions about how to strengthen families increasingly end with calls to create family support and education programs. Moreover, family support is increasingly seen as distinct from, but intimately related to, the provision of quality child care, early childhood education, child welfare services, and the like. Specifically, family support is perceived as a distinct set of services and helping strategies, which may be either free-standing or used to enrich existing services for children and families.

A second and related factor driving state policymakers' interest has been the small but growing body of research that documents the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of preventive family-oriented early intervention programs (Barnett & Escobar, 1987; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Research on early childhood programs from the 1960s onward suggests that programs that work with parents to strengthen parenting skills and to enhance the familial and community context for human development, can produce long-term gains for children and youth in areas of particular interest to state policymakers. These include reductions in school failure, juvenile crime, and incidence of teen pregnancy. While the existing research provides some encouragement about the potential effectiveness of family oriented prevention programs, it does not give specific direction to those charged with developing and targeting such programs. Further, it must be pointed out that many of the programs that have documented effects were research and demonstration projects, with a conceptually coherent approach guiding the model of services and a high degree of quality control during program implementation (Halpern & Weiss, 1988). The current choices faced by policy makers and program developers require judgments that would be enhanced by a) information about how others states have crafted their policies, and b) information from veteran program directors within their own state to assure the initiative is responsive to local conditions.

The third factor driving states' interest in strengthening families is a result of the way in which family support programs reinforce the primacy that Americans place on the family and its child rearing role. The fact that the goals and rhetoric of these programs stress family responsibilities, as well as the

responsibility of the community to support families, helps reconcile the ideological poles with respect to public involvement in family life. These programs attempt to achieve the aims often expressed by conservatives: strengthening and promoting well-functioning, independent, self-supporting families. Yet they are also in accord with the more liberal perspective that extrafamilial and community support are critical for effective family functioning. In effect, these programs create a middle ground where conservatives and liberals can meet to support programs designed to strengthen both families and communities. In addition, several of the states that have begun to sponsor these programs have allowed for considerable local discretion in shaping local programs, which may have made them less vulnerable to charges that the state was dictating how to parent.

Finally, increased state interest and involvement in these programs is the result of the changing role of state government in provision of service to children and families, and the emergence of a group of state policy entrepreneurs in education and the human services (Weiss, 1988b; Hausman, Gerlach, & Weiss, 1987). As one analyst of state government has suggested, during the 1960s and 1970s, the role of the state was defined almost exclusively as one of management of federally sponsored social programs (Elazar, 1981). But now, the state role has broadened to include governance: <u>making</u> as well as implementing policies. Increased state responsibility has fostered a diverse group of legislators, governors, and public administrators who conceive of their role and of that of state government as entrepreneurial and proactive, rather than strictly managerial and reactive. In education and human services, this new breed of public administrator exhibits a willingness to stay with an issue, even when initial financial and other support are not immediately available, and to build and maintain the intra- and sometimes inter-agency coalitions necessary to mount new initiatives. These policy entrepreneurs have been in the forefront of the creation of state-sponsored family support and education programs.

Recent State Initiatives

At this juncture, the states are at different stages in their efforts to strengthen families. Some, such as Alaska, are now in the report and commission stage, during which they are defining their problems,

developing approaches, and building the coalitions necessary to mount new programs and alter old ones (Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth, 1988). Others such as Kentucky with its PACE program, Arkansas with its HIPPY program, Connecticut with the Parent Education and Support Centers, and Maryland, with its Family Support Centers, are developing pilot programs and the state infrastructure necessary to support, monitor, and provide technical assistance. California has for many years offered parent education classes through Community and Adult Education, and has weathered funding cuts due to Proposition 13, legislation passed to limit taxes in the state. Two states, Missouri and Minnesota, have more recent legislation that provides for statewide family support and education programs: Missouri's Parents As Teachers Program; and Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education Program.

The Harvard Family Research Project has drawn on the experiences of these states to identify a number of common issues and choices that must be addressed when crafting policies regarding family support and education programs.

The Funding Mechanism. None of the state initiatives have relied on reallocation of existing resources or fees paid by parent participants in order to fund local programs. At the pilot stage, programs have tended to be funded on an annual basis through a competitive grant mechanism. In Minnesota, local pilot programs were encouraged, but not required, to solicit funding from additional sources. Other state initiatives in the pilot stage have required local programs to provide, or enter into cooperative agreements with other community agencies to provide, key services such as transportation, health care and family planning, adult basic education, temporary child care, or diagnostic and assessment services.

As the initiatives move to state-wide implementation, a funding mechanism is adopted that usually builds upon existing state policies regarding funding of local programs. In Minnesota, local school boards certified to offer Community Education programs may also levy for early childhood family education by a vote of the School Board. When the levy does not generate the maximum revenue allowable under the legislation, state aid is used to make up the difference. On the other hand, Missouri requires that every school district provide parent education and family support services. Currently, the state reimburses local districts according to a calculation based on participation, with each family being assigned a reimbursement

level based on the number of recorded contracts per year.

States have typically weighed the advantaged and disadvantages of a particular funding mechanism in terms of:

* The precedent in the state for allocating funds to local school districts or social service agencies;
* The ability to predict and control state expenditures;
* Ease of administration at the state and local levels in both data collection and recordkeeping;
* Equalization of funding across wealthy and poorer areas of the state;
* Incentives for local district or agency participation and local fiscal effort required;
* Adequacy in covering start-up costs;
* Responsiveness of the funding mechanism to efficient program growth and inflation over time;
* Incentives for local programs to collaborate with other agencies and organizations to meet the needs of difficult-to-serve families and to aviod duplication of services;
* Provision for adequate financial support to assure minimum standards of programming;
* The degree to which local programs would be limited to using the funds on activities directly related to family support and education;
* Flexibility of local implementation in terms of administration, programming, staffing, and licensure; and
* Protection of the initiative from interest groups who might support diverting the funds to other services or adding service requirements to the existing funding mechanism.

Universal vs. Targeted Programs. The diverse experience of state and local districts suggests that the choice of whether to cast the initiative as a universal or targeted service is a difficult one, involving complex trade-offs. Both Minnesota and Missouri funded their family support and education initiatives on a universal basis; in Missouri, these programs are open to anyone in local school districts with children 0-3; in Minnesota, 0-6. Kentucky, on the other hand, has targeted its pilot programs to the districts with the highest adult illiteracy and school drop-out rates.

The states offering programs on a universal basis argue that their programs are a downward extension of public education, which has a tradition of providing universal services. By making the program

universal, they minimize any possible stigma that might be associated with targeted programs. Informants in Minnesota and Missouri also indicated there are political reasons to support universal programs. Specifically, they suggested that broad political support was necessary to get the legislation authorizing the programs passed. These informants also noted that political support from middle class voters was important for continued legislative support of the program and that in some cases, there is a middle-class backlash against services targeted to particular groups.

Once universal programs are in place, evaluations of their outreach and effectiveness with high-risk families prompt questions about whether they can indeed reach and serve these groups. This, then, raises questions about equity. In some places, it appears that without extensive outreach efforts and substantial differentiation of programming, it is only possible to attract and serve families that are easy to reach, posing the danger that such programs will become simply a benefit for the middle class.

Those who are developing programs targeted to certain groups considered to be at-risk cite the logic of allocating scarce resources to those most in need. They also stress the need to develop population-specific program models and to get sufficient resources at the outset to serve groups that are difficult to reach and serve. However, proponents of targeted services have to contend with an imprecise technology for determining who is genuinely at-risk, and with the problems that are sometimes solved by universal models. These are a) the possible stigmatizing effect of participation in the program; and b) the possible political problems associated with the middle class or, sometimes, the rural voter's resentment and lack of support for programs that are targeted to particular at-risk, usually poor, urban populations.

One resolution of the complex question of who these programs should serve involves a "have your cake and eat it too" strategy in which the program provides a minimum amount of universally available service, perhaps even on a sliding-fee scale; and more intensive and differentiated services for groups of families subsequently judged to be particularly stressed or at-risk. This strategy appears to be developing in both Minnesota and Missouri. In Minneapolis, ECFE staff are providing parent and child classes in neighborhood sites around the city, while at a same time joining with other community agencies such as hospitals and social services to provide more differentiated services to high-risk families. Similarly, in

Missouri, the PAT program has begun to provide more intensive services for teen mothers and others regarded to be at-risk.

The Need for Joint Initiatives. The programs are often the first to identify a family as being at-risk. Interviews with the directors and school personnel associated with these programs suggest that by design, and often by default, they function as a screening device during the period prior to public school entry. Few other agencies in the community have regular contact with children and families before the child enters the public school. Some programs, such as Missouri's PAT, include screening as regular part of the services; however, informally, many other programs detect both child and family problems that call for additional assistance beyond that which the program itself can provide. One of the chief ways programs address this problem is through information and referral for individual participants. At the program level, these school-based programs put considerable effort into the creation of formal and informal linkages and coordination with other community agencies. Nonetheless, many program directors report that they still cannot meet the needs of many of the high-risk families that they identify. The experiences of these programs makes it clear that most school systems alone, cannot take on all of the responsibility for enhancing child development and strengthening families.

The need to provide more comprehensive services for high-risk families has led a number of these programs to develop joint initiatives with other community agencies and create broader partnerships in order to develop larger systems of comprehensive, continuous, and intensive services for at-risk families. The experience of some local ECFE programs in Minnesota suggests that a school-based family support and education program makes a unique contribution to this inter-agency service package because they are two-generational programs, designed to facilitate both the parent's and the child's human development.

In fact, both of Minnesota's Twin Cities are currently designing comprehensive programs for at-risk families in which the school-based ECFE program would be partner with other community agencies. In St. Paul, for example, the Amherst Wilder Foundation has spearheaded a pilot program involving a three-way partnership between the St. Paul Department of Public Health, the Department of Social Services, and the ECFE Program. Public-health nurses assess the stresses and supports of families at birth, and then

provide an array of services in conjunction with the social service department and the ECFE program. In Minneapolis, the ECFE program is a partner in a larger proposal to promote the school readiness of that city's children. That plan, titled Way To Grow (Kurz-Riemer, Larson, & Fluornoy, 1987) is designed to coordinate the activities of a variety of community agencies into a continuous, intensive array of services to meet the needs of at-risk children and families. The proposed partners in the plan include the ECFE program, public health nurses, and social services. Whether this local initiative becomes a reality or not is yet to be seen. Regardless, the lesson for policy makers and planners is that the more at-risk the target population, the more all agencies serving families in a community must coordinate and collaborate in their efforts to adequately serve them.

Standardization and Flexibility. At the outset, program formulators face critical decisions about how much to standardize programs and how much to encourage local flexibility and variation. The states we have studied created hybrids: they have neither a top-down model by which the state imposes a uniform program, nor simply a diverse set of grassroots programs. Rather, in the early stages of implementation, the states have created a grant mechanism to get new programs going, and then created a system of support for the programs through training and technical assistance. They have tried to make these systems flexible to foster program growth, but also to build in accountability. Eventually, states such as Minnesota have shifted the program onto some type of funding formula allowing statewide adoption.

This hybrid plan for program development and growth involves state specification of some program elements and flexibility with respect to others. Some of the program areas worthy of consideration for state specification at the outset include:

1. Specification of where the program belongs administratively and how it will function. Will the initiative be developed as a new agency or unit of an existing organizational structure or will it seek to transform now existing programs or service providers relate to families? If the initiative is based within the public schools, does it belong under K-12, community education, or early childhood, or is this choice best left to district discretion? If the initiative is placed under the auspices of state human serves or public health, will it be developed as a separate unit integrated into the network of mental health, child welfare,

family service, or income support programs, or be allowed to develop as local partnerships between governmental units and nonprofit agencies charged with serving children and their parents?

2. Specification of general program goals and components. For example, is the program designed primarily to promote child development, or adult development in conjunction with child development, through provision of literacy, GED, or job training services? What are the minimum types and amounts of services the program should provide?

3. Specification of the population to be served. Is the program to be targeted to particular groups (e.g., at-risk infants and their parents) or open on a universal basis? What mechanisms will determine whether the program is reaching the intended population?

4. Specification of the need and criteria for participation in advisory groups. What groups should be represented and what will their role be in relation to program governance?

5. Specification of the characteristics and training of staff and of plans for certification and for provision of in-service training. Are parent educators available or certified for programs in the state? Does a new training and certification system need to be created? What state and local training should/will be available?

6. Specification of whether, and how, the program is to work with other local programs for families, including pre-existing family support and education programs. Can the program subcontract with pre-existing programs to get parent support and education services? What arrangements should be made for information and referral with other agencies?

Local programs also need to have flexibility in many areas if they are to feel a sense of ownership and respond to local needs and resources. These include: how and where the services are delivered; development or adaptation of curriculum materials and program formats; opportunities to create relationships with other community agencies; and outreach strategies.

Building in Evaluation and Accountability. Family support and education programs are a relatively new type of human service. In order to legitimize these programs and develop the most effective types of programs for different types of families, it is important to build careful outcome evaluations into some state

and local programs. At this juncture, data from individual research and demonstration programs is perhaps less important than data about the implementation and effectiveness of multi-site state systems of programs because policymakers want and need to know whether these programs can be implemented and be effective on a widespread basis (Weiss & Halpern, 1988). Further, if evaluation research is to be truly useful for program growth and development, the conception of evaluation needs to be broadened from simple outcome assessment to include documentation of program processes and implementation. Moreover, it is important to assess the full range of possible program effects; this means that some programs should measure the effects of the program not only on the child, but also on the parent, on parent-child interaction and on the community (Weiss, 1988). Plans are now under way in Missouri, Minnesota, and Kentucky to examine both program implementation and outcomes.

The Labor Pool. States moving quickly into statewide program implementation experience difficulties recruiting and training local staff. A large number of people trained -- or even experienced -- in working with parents and in facilitating adult development is not available in many communities. Staff often need substantial training in order to work with families in the new way prescribed by these programs. State-level leadership is needed to draw the post-secondary education and training institutions in to provide opportunities for preservice and inservice education.

Programs across the states also exhibit a tremendous variation in certification requirements, pay scales, and opportunities for career growth for staff. We have found that state-sponsored initiatives make early efforts to standardize these issues across the state so as to regulate program quality and reduce staff turnover and/or burnout. But policies in these areas run the risk of becoming self-serving and must consider that grassroots family support and education programs have traditionally valued flexibility and the hiring of staff who can treat parent participants as peers.

Leadership and Capacity Building. It is clear from our case studies that sustained leadership plays a critical role. These leaders, coming typically from state agencies or the legislature, build coalitions both from within and outside of government, involving the various advocacy groups and constituencies having a stake in these programs. Analysis of how these leaders "sold" their initiatives shows that they advocated

family support and education as a programmatic response to social problems of current interest in their particular state. So, for example, in Minnesota and Missouri, the PAT and ECFE programs were seen as a way to prevent costly later problems such as school failure. In each state, leadership teams worked actively to diffuse opposition that came from other agencies or groups concerned about "turf" issues. Then, they maintained active involvement in both administrative and programmatic issues as they emerged.

From their experience, the key areas for which capacity must be built include:

1. A method for providing local programs with technical assistance in planning and implementation of their services;

2. A system for providing ongoing training -- preservice and inservice -- for local administrators and service providers in order to foster a strong ideological commitment to family support and education and an understanding of the program and curriculum;

3. The development of a peer network in order to obtain input and support from local service providers in the development of program guidelines in such areas as health, safety, and educational standards for the children's learning environment; successful approaches for coordinating services within and between other agencies concerned with children and their parents; staff training; and certification requirements;

4. A method for supporting local providers through the use of newsletters and promotional materials, and the establishment of a professional association; and

5. Attention to the need for ongoing state-level networking to maintain support for the initiative within the legislature and across agency lines.

Conclusion

The experience of the five pioneering states described here suggests that family support and education programs offer states a powerful way to build new supports for families. These states are struggling to make the best use of an escalating interest in family policy to help families nurture their children so they can live up to their potential and make positive contributions to society. The danger is that the impetus for, or content of, governmental agendas regarding the welfare of young children and their families will shift before policy formulation and sustained action can take place.

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Table 1: Characteristics of Community-Based Family Support and Education Programs

What They Provide:

* Social support in a goal-oriented framework; information, guidance, feedback, practical assistance, emotional support.

* Sustained support to young families; regular interaction over a period of months or years.

* A focus both on enhancing parenting and on attending to the intra- and extra-familial forces impinging on parenting.

* A secure, accepting climate in which young parents can share and explore child-rearing goals, beliefs, and concerns.

* Efforts to promote and/or strengthen informal support ties among young families in the neighborhood or community.

* Advocacy on behalf of the population served for improved services and other institutional supports.

* Efforts to reach out to families unwilling or unable to seek support themselves, and encouragement of their capacity to accept and use support.

How They Provide It:

* Preventative approach to addressing family needs for support; focus on promoting development rather than diagnosing and treating dysfunction.

* Child-rearing messages shared in a context of respect for cultural preferences in child-rearing values, and support for families' own self-directed efforts to care for and nurture their children.

* Participants have a voice in shaping the emphasis and content of their interactions with the program.

* Goals, emphasis, and types of services provided are shaped by local conditions and concerns, and by strengths and gaps in (other) local services.

* Voluntary participation.

* Most programs are located to be easily accessible, most have relatively simple, non-threatening intake procedures.

* Community members often work with families, within the framework of a peer-to-peer orientation.

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